Richard K. Betts
Columbia University

THE FUTURE OF FORCE

October 27, 2003

Richard K. Betts
Columbia University

THE FUTURE OF FORCE

The following discussion touches on (1) probable occasions for the use of military force up to 2020; (2) the role of international institutions in affecting decisions to use force; (3) evolution of international norms on employment of force, and the effects of norms; (4) effects of technological change; (5) reactions of other countries to the use of American power. The main arguments are that developments in the use of force that can be reasonably estimated will not be major changes from practices that have evolved in the past dozen years, but that developments that could mark big shifts are entirely possible. Most of the major changes of previous eras were low on the list of probabilities -- if on the list at all -- before they occurred.

When and Where Will the Use of Force Be Most Likely? Predicting From and Away From Current Trajectories

Probabilities that the U.S. will use force in significant ways in the years up to 2020 depend on:

Challenges and opportunities that will not be anticipated until shortly before they erupt. The most likely uses of force are those that we do not now see as likely.

Potential crises or opportunities that are currently recognized. This does not contradict the previous point. The United States uses force quite often. Many occasions are surprises, others are ones that were seen coming.

Feedback from experience. Successes at low cost will encourage more frequent resort to force, failures or pyrrhic victories will discourage it.

Who is in power in Washington. Parties, politics, and personalities will determine which choices are made in all but the most compelling situations (most compelling meaning when the United States is attacked directly).

It is risky to predict the future on the basis of current trajectories of events, because developments deflect or derail trajectories, and unimportant countries become important without much warning. In none of the past six decades would estimators have put high on their lists of predictions the crises or wars that broke out. Who would have predicted in 1943 that a decade later the United States would be ending a war against its World War II ally China in an obscure country like Korea? or in 1953 that the closest brush with nuclear war would come over a crisis in Cuba? or in 1963, following the

victory in the missile crisis, that within a decade the United States would be pulling back from military activism abroad? or in 1973 that in ten years American forces would be fighting in Grenada and Beirut? or in 1983 that within a decade the United States would have fought a major war against Iraq and would be in combat in Somalia? or in 1993 that the next ten years would see three American wars, and against countries like Serbia, Afghanistan, and Iraq again?

Nevertheless, some occasions of conflict are anticipated. Estimates should consider both what developments could plausibly flow from the current trajectory of events (points that are noted in italics below), and what changes in international or domestic conditions could make the main strategic engagements of the United States completely novel.

Limited humanitarian interventions in small countries that pose few risks of long-term entanglement will be frequent, but more often undertaken by European countries or United Nations-mandated coalitions than by the United States. The implicit division of labor by which American forces do the heavy lifting of conventional war, and allies do the dishes of peacekeeping, will not be established in principle, but seems to have emerged in practice. In the context of the current reluctant embroilment in nation-building in Iraq, nothing at present appears to be working in the other direction. The United States may participate in humanitarian interventions, but more probably as a junior partner and with token contingents. If the recent crisis in Liberia could not overcome the legacy of Somalia 1993 enough to energize prompt and decisive intervention, few "normal" emergencies will.

Three conditions could make the United States a more enthusiastic practitioner of humanitarian uses of force. One would be the imminent prospect of another shameful large-scale *genocide* like Rwanda's in 1994. Burundi is a case in point, where preliminary warning of the danger already exists.

Another condition would be the advent of stable inter-state peace throughout the areas in which the United States has been strategically engaged. This would leave the U.S. armed forces with no preferred missions, and in danger of withering away if they lacked other rationales for deployment. Previously disdained missions would then have to be welcomed. Interstate peace impressive enough to have this effect would require at least the elimination of the two principal remaining rogue regimes and their replacement with compliant, friendly governments, and resolution of the Taiwan problem; it would be most likely with more thoroughgoing change such as integration of Russia in the West (including membership in NATO) and democratization of China.

The third condition would be the coming to power of politically secure liberal interventionists in the White House and Congress. This would have most effect if the domestic change coincided with either of the first two conditions.

Unconventional counterterror operations will be frequent -- attempted whenever possible -- at least until Al Qaeda is neutralized. The only conditions under which

counterterrorism might recede to minor activity would be retrenchment of U.S. presence abroad so dramatic that it turned terrorists with global reach away from focusing on American interference in their societies as a prime grievance. At the least that would mean evacuation of the Middle East and the end of massive U.S. diplomatic, military, and financial support to Israel.

Conventional wars between states will be rare. Interstate wars became rare altogether after the middle of the 20th century, and most civil wars have been unconventional, guerrilla-style wars. Looking forward, the disincentives to the United States to take on North Korea or Iran militarily are substantial. Hardly any other major powers appear inclined to engage each other, or to be challenged by weaker countries, at the conventional level.

One big potential exception is the India-Pakistan conflict, where miscalculation and unplanned escalation could overwhelm mutual nuclear deterrence. Another case lower in probability but higher in consequence for the United States would be a U.S.-PRC war over Taiwan.

Use of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) is the biggest wild card. The first catastrophic incident (tens of thousands of fatalities) would change trends in unpredictable ways. It could plausibly trigger either panicked retreat from confrontation and a groundswell for disarmament, on one hand, or indiscriminate preventive wars on the other. Use of nuclear weapons is less likely than use of chemical weapons (CW) or biological (BW), but is still not a negligible possibility. Inadvertent escalation in South Asia, or reckless escalation by North Korea, offer the main possibilities. By 2020 it will be three-quarters of a century since nuclear weapons were first used in combat. It would be an unusual achievement to find a major weapon still unused over such a span of time.

Use of chemical weapons somewhere is most likely, because they are comparatively easy to procure, but CW in most scenarios are not really in the mass destruction category. CW are also least likely to cause major changes in attitudes or policies because, having been used a number of times in recent decades, they are not unprecedented and therefore seem less shocking.

Use of BW should be the greatest concern, in theory, because they combine the high killing power of nuclear weapons and the comparative availability of CW. In practice, however, BW do not appear to have captured the imaginations of rogue regimes, or to frighten American leaders, to the extent that they should by virtue of their physical killing capacity. No state has yet attempted to brandish BW for deterrence or coercive leverage. For governments, nuclear weapons will probably remain the most sought options for countering the American threat; for non-state terrorist groups, CW and BW may be sought by default, as the only obtainable WMD for coercing or punishing western countries.

International Institutions as Influences on Force

In the first decade after the Cold War many expected international institutions such as the United Nations to exert far greater control over the authorization and employment of military force. This did appear to happen in the 1991 Persian Gulf War. It also occurred especially in peace operations, as many such interventions were mandated by the UN, or at least by NATO, which although it is really an alliance, has come to be seen by many as a collective security organ.

Such institutions play a role in blessing the use of force, and in coordinating the use of national contingents for participation in peacekeeping. They will be less significant for either inducing countries to employ force on a significant scale, or preventing them from doing so, when those countries' governments reach different conclusions about the necessity of force. For inducing intervention, the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) does not move faster than the decisions of the member governments themselves. For preventing use of force, it is hard to think of a case in which a major power refrained from combat because it lacked permission from an international institution. The recent American assault on Iraq despite the UNSC's refusal to authorize it is the clearest example.

Do recent events herald a crisis for the UN, the danger as some see it that the organization will become irrelevant in the years leading to 2020? No -- or at least not any more than was true for most of the UN's history, when the Cold War hobbled the Security Council. The recent humbling of the Security Council and Secretary General by the unilateral American decision to wage war against Iraq marks not a new departure but a reversion to the pattern of superpower behavior in the first four decades of the UN's existence. This is a surprise to observers who mistook the 1990s pattern of superpower collaboration with the UN for a new authority of the UN, and who assumed that the UN and NATO would take over the regulation of security worldwide.

The notion that international law now requires UNSC authorization (or at least the sanction of a major regional organization like NATO) for waging war is an idea that grew in the past dozen years and achieved currency as the governments of small countries, their lawyer functionaries and diplomats, and international bureaucrats embraced it. Until recently it was easy to confuse the cooperation of great powers with procedures of international institutions on decisions about intervention -- which occurred because interests of the countries and of the institutions coincided in most post-Cold War cases -- with the cession of sovereign prerogatives to make war. In the coming decades cooperation of major powers with international institutions will continue to *reflect* common interests, but will not override major powers' own strategic decisions.

International Norms Limiting Uses of Force

Two distinct dimensions of the evolution of norms on permissible tactics in the application of force do not necessarily coincide: content and impact. The groups that control one may not control the other.

Prevalent norms will be shaped and usually observed by the large majority of countries in the world that do not engage in great power competition or major combat actions outside their own borders. Disinclined and unable to play in the same strategic league as the United States and a few other major powers, this majority exerts its greatest influence by collaborating through international organizations such as the United Nations or the new International Criminal Court to promote rules with content designed to be universal, and thereby to bind the great powers who do fight wars of consequence.

For norms that are consistently in everyone's interest, effect will follow, but for ones that leave combatant states in occasionally problematic positions, effects will be limited. The major powers will not accept "universal" rules that contravene their strategic interests, nor will smaller powers whose territorial or regime security is less than that of the majority in the "international community." Or if the rules are accepted in principle, their interpretation by State Department or Foreign Ministry lawyers will ensure that violations are never admitted.

In any event, the content of norms on use of force is unlikely to change very much in two decades. The principal one aimed at constraining force or assigning blame is the norm against aggression, which is quite old and is now accepted in principle by all. It is no closer to being defined in a way on which all agree, however, and has little effect on behavior. There is no reason to expect that by 2020 there will be more progress in establishing consensus on standards for charging aggression than there has been in the last century.

Norms have already evolved fairly far toward constrained standards for employment of weapons. Deliberate killing of civilians has been entirely delegitimized, and expectations of strong efforts to prevent accidental collateral damage have grown. (The most dramatic reflection of this trend is the recent institutionalization of direct oversight by lawyers in targeting processes for U.S. and NATO forces during and since the war over Kosovo.) It is unlikely that even the pressure of events would reverse the trend and promote formal recognition of more permissive criteria for killing.

Nevertheless, a significant minority of countries still seek to develop -- or to keep -- inventories of nuclear weapons, despite the fact that such weapons' principal effects are against noncombatants. The disjunction with norms against killing civilians is finessed by rationales based on deterrence and the aim of preventing war, but proliferation reflects the priority of security and strategy over rules divorced from particular situations.

Whatever the content of evolving norms may be, however, their impact will vary with the importance of the case. Practical pressures for relaxing constraints could come from a change in the priority placed on combat success. (This may already have happened in certain parts of the American war against terrorists.) When the users of force believe effective action to be required for their own genuinely vital interests, rather than for humanitarian purposes (the vital interests of others), and effectiveness is threatened by constraints in targeting, the users will be more likely to risk violating demanding standards for restraint. (We have probably already seen a more peermissive application of targeting standards in U.S. bombing of Afghanistan in 2001 than in the Kosovo War two years before.) In that event explicit acceptance of civilian casualties -- a revision of norms -- will not be the solution. Rather official rhetoric will more likely ignore the change in practice, explain controversial results as accidents and proclaim continued concern, or ignore the question altogether.

One development that could push norms even further toward restraining combat tactics would be the advent of revolutionary capabilities in non-lethal or "less-lethal" weapons. If novel instruments for subduing targets without destroying them become capable of decisive results not just in riot control but on the battlefield as well, many -- especially in the nations of the international community that do not engage much in the use of force themselves -- will push to establish the norm that such weapons become the prime military instruments. (This tendency would be greatest among countries whose conception of force focuses on peacekeeping and policing rather than regular war.) Although there has been significant progress in research and development of less-lethal weapons, no such revolutionary change is yet on the horizon.

Norms against collateral damage may be honored by less use of imprecise weaponry simply because technology and combat effectiveness mandate greater reliance on precision strikes. It is always easy to honor humanitarian norms when the requirements of combat effectiveness coincide with them. This combination of purp0ose may be less available for countries that lack the precision technology of the United States, but few such countries have been engaged in conventional military operations anyway, or seem likely to be major military actors (beyond internal actions to pacify their own countries) in the next couple decades. The exceptions would be "rogue" regimes defending themselves against attack, and they are unlikely to worry about international norms.

How clear will norms be? They will be most impressive if codified in international agreements and addressed by international institutions, such as the new International Criminal Court. Whether the United States feels bound by such formal declarations will depend primarily on who is in power in the United States, and what counterpressures there will be against accepting the new norms as international law. In recent times the great powers have more or less refused to be bound by restraints in treaties favored by the majority of states when the new norms inhibit desired military options -- for example, the United States, China, and Russia initially refused to adhere to the treaty banning land mines, which most other countries who do not worry about performing a wide range of conventional military missions themselves were happy to

embrace. When a U.S. administration lacks interest in preserving options constrained by emerging rules, Washington may embrace them, as in the Clinton administration's endorsement of the Comprehensive Test Ban. The Senate's rejection of that treaty, however, leaves few if any examples of American acceptance of new rules that preclude old established military operations.

Technological Change

For the United States, new technologies will have tactical effects on employment of force more than strategic ones. Capacity for real-time, detailed visual tracking of human targets, for example, will make it easier to mount discrete attacks by facilitating strikes at times and places where large-scale collateral damage can be avoided. This may make it easier at the margins of decision to use military instruments for counterterror operations, but should not change more general decisions about war or peace.

For American adversaries, however, the spread of old technologies (for WMD) could have major strategic consequences. If adversaries manage to acquire and deploy "finite" but secure nuclear deterrent forces, U.S. freedom of action will be constrained. This is potentially dangerous not only because Americans would prefer to have carte blanche, but because acceptance of this constraint may be tentative, ambivalent, and an occasion for miscalculation.

For forty years of Cold War Americans took for granted that we could not liberate Russians or Eastern Europeans from their odious regimes. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, however, Americans stopped being accustomed to being deterred, and the dominance of deterrence as an overarching rationale for American strategy disappeared. Recent shifts in strategic doctrine toward reliance on ballistic missile defense and on preventive war have reinforced the notion that the United States should not be deterred from attacking other countries that deserve to be defeated. The United States was not deterred from attacking Iraq by what was thought at the time to be a potent Iraqi stock of biological weapons capable of killing millions.

Apparently for psychological reasons more than simple estimates of casualties that could result, the prospect of nuclear weapons in the hands of rogue states is more daunting to U.S. leaders. Readjusting to constraint from fear of even small nuclear retaliation could prove awkward, but could easily happen in the near future. It has already implicitly begun to happen in the Bush administration's latest moves to mollify North Korea's concern with regime security. If a crisis occurs, however, recent American rhetoric and actions suggest that rogue regimes' finite nuclear deterrents might not be sufficient to deter U.S. attack. Then the odds that such a regime could manage to deliver a handful of nuclear weapons (perhaps in combination with BW) against U.S. cities via clandestine means, or by airbreathing systems such as jumbo jets from national airlines or cruise missiles from merchant ships, would become crucial.

How Will Other Countries React to the Use of U.S. Power?

Responses will run the gamut, according to the degree that countries beholding American power feel threatened by it. They will react by cooperating , carping, cowering, collaborating, or countering.

Cooperating. Some allied governments like Blair's Britain, or those who foresee diplomatic and economic benefits from bandwagoning (like "the new Europe" or newly independent countries near Russia that want American patronage) will line up and ask no questions.

Carping. Skeptical allies or other countries that oppose American uses of force will probably react rhetorically more than actively, criticizing from the sidelines, charging the United States with immoral, illegal, arrogant, myopic, and counterproductive muscle-flexing. In theory, we might expect that other countries will form counterbalancing coalitions to check American power. For more than a dozen years, however, the United States has been the sole superpower or hyper-power and has exerted that power frequently (for example, fighting twice as many wars in the short post-Cold War period,at a fraction of the cost in blood and treasure, as during the four-decade Cold War) but has not yet provoked real balancing action. Despite much finger-shaking, other major powers have not done anything concrete to oppose U.S. initiatives. Even the sort of "soft" balancing predicted by Robert Pape -- foot dragging and diplomatic obstructionism -- has been notable by how little there is of it so far.

Cowering. Realism about material self-interest should make helpless adversaries lie low and avoid provocation, hoping to escape being targeted. Three types of exceptions may react instead with reckless confrontation.

One exception would be a religiously motivated regime that believes God is on its side (for example, Iran at the height of its revolution two decades ago, or Pakistan after a revolution or radical coup d'état a decade from now), or that moral rather than material interests are the measure of policy.

Another exception would be rogue regimes that see U.S. demands leaving them no possibility of survival even if they make concessions -- those who believe they are in the position of Saddam Hussein in 2002. At present it is hard to see which countries could be such low-hanging fruit for the United States as Iraq was -- countries with no allies or options for either deterring or appeasing Washington.

The third exception is a fanatical secular regime like North Korea -- although North Korea may be sui generis. Pyongyang's penchant for acting like a state with delusions of equality has been fed by a unique record of success in provocation from a position of weakness. (Consider that remarkable record: in the 1960s, the Blue House raid, seizure of the *Pueblo*, and shooting down of the EC-121; in the 1970s, murder of American officers in the tree-cutting incident, assassination of President Park's wife, and tunneling under the DMZ; in the 1980s, bombing of the South Korean cabinet in

Rangoon and of an airliner in flight; in the 1990s, threats that imposition of economic sanctions would trigger war; and over long spans of time, kidnappings and commando infiltrations. *None* of these initiatives produced forcible U.S. retaliation, and in 1994 resistance to being called to account for violation of the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty prompted American accommodation.

Collaborating. Although counterbalancing against American primacy has not happened yet, there is no reason that it cannot. One counter-coalition that would be both plausible and potent would be an anti-American alliance of Russia and China. Tensions between both countries and Washington have fluctuated, and are low at the moment, but U.S. policy on NATO expansion, the Balkans, moving bases into Central Asia, and defense of Taiwan provide long-term sources of conflict with both countries, and an incentive to them to subordinate their suspicions of each other to cooperation against the common threat of American pressure. Such an alliance becomes more likely if conflict over the Taiwan issue grows at the same time as conflict between Russia and NATO over such matters as the status of Russians in Estonia.

Countering. Fanatical or desperate adversaries will seek to counter the United States by mobilizing diplomatic and political support for opposition to American force, or by developing "asymmetric" means of deterrence and retaliation. North Korea, for example, tends to act not like a realistic weak state, but like a suicidal one ready to bring others down with it. It or other rogue regimes may try confrontational strategies, despite the gross imbalance of power. They will do this if they see no alternative to guarantee survival. They may also do this for the purpose of deterring the United States. The danger then is that Washington will see not deterrence, but provocation, and the deterrent strategy may provoke preventive war as an American response.